

Barry O'Halloran

Ireland proves you don't need Jews for anti-Semitism to take hold

The existence of fewer than 2,000 Jewish people in the country has not deterred hatred



Ireland appears to have a singular fixation on Israel, accusing it of the worst crimes known to humanity Credit: Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters

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The roads around County Louth and other Irish border counties are no strangers to political graffiti. For decades during the Troubles, the graffiti message painted on the roads in this so-called bandit country was unambiguous: “BRITS OUT”.

Last week, a new but equally unambiguous two-word graffiti appeared on a border road, “RAT JEW”. Covering about 100 yards, the anti-Semitic graffiti was accompanied by drawings of swastikas painted alongside Stars of David.

In response, the state-funded Holocaust Awareness Ireland (HAI) responded by claiming that “graffiti is a bellwether of national sentiment”. HAI believed that the appearance of this anti-Semitic graffiti makes public “the implications of a citizenry that accepts such explicit threats to a single ethnic minority”.

Last week – prior to the graffiti being made public – Taoiseach Micheál Martin claimed: “There are no doubts that certain elements are weaponising Ireland’s stance on Gaza against Ireland.” He resolutely rejected any suggestion that “Ireland is anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli”. However, the graffiti writers of Co Louth have now made that claim a matter of public debate.

A recent opinion poll for the Irish *Sunday Independent* asked readers: “Do you believe Ireland has an anti-Semitism problem?” Nine per cent voted “don’t know”, 21 per cent responded “yes”, and 70 per cent said “No”. So an overwhelming majority of Irish people effectively agree with the Taoiseach that Ireland is neither anti-Semitic nor anti-Israeli.

Yet Ireland is widely seen internationally as the most anti-Israeli country in Europe. Indeed, Israel closed its embassy in Dublin a year ago because “of the extreme anti-Israel policies of the Irish government”.

Ireland not only joined South Africa’s legal action against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), it went even further by asking the court “to broaden its interpretation of what constitutes the commission of genocide by a state”. The decision to seek to change the legal definition of genocide, in effect, to better fit the crime to Israel was defended by then Taoiseach, Simon Harris whom Israeli foreign minister, Gideon Sa’ar branded as an anti-Semite.

Then-president Michael D Higgins was indignant. “To suggest that because one criticises prime minister Netanyahu one is anti-Semitic is such a gross defamation and slander,” he said. And so it would be, if it were true.

But Simon Harris had not “criticised Netanyahu”, he had defended Ireland’s accusation of genocide, the “crime of crimes”, at the ICJ; without proffering any evidence to support the claim. It was a classic misdirection play by Higgins.



Ireland is widely seen internationally as the most anti-Israeli country in Europe Credit: Anadolu/Getty Images

This whole interchange is instructive because it is typical of those – not only in Ireland but elsewhere – who claim not to be anti-Semitic and yet have a singular fixation on Israel, accusing it, uniquely, of the worst crimes known to humanity. This dissonance is partly explained by people having very different definitions of what anti-Semitism actually is. But that is only part of the explanation.

An essential feature of anti-Semitism is its shape-shifting nature over time. False accusations of collective guilt against Jews, have been central to anti-Semitism for centuries. The first was simple anti-Judaism, based on antipathy to the Jews as “Christ killers”. The second was “classical” anti-Semitism, a race-based hatred exemplified by the Nazis.

More recently, Israelis are characterised as settler-colonialists who, like earlier American and Australian settlers, are charged with an innate compulsion to eliminate indigenous peoples. This has a particular sectarian significance in Ireland – where the descendants of Protestant settlers who arrived in Ireland in the 17th century are still sometimes dismissed contemptuously as “planters”.

The iterations may be different, but the underlying impulse is the same – casting Jews as the enemy and using the moral language of the time, whether it is religion, race, or human rights, to justify the accusation. For these reasons, anti-Semitism is the hatred that never dies.

A century ago, James Joyce exposed Ireland’s unconvincing disavowal of anti-Semitism in his masterpiece, *Ulysses*. In Leopold Bloom, Joyce, an Irish Catholic, created one of the most enduring Jewish characters in modern English literature.

In *Ulysses*, anti-Semitism is a recurring motif that is woven into the fabric of the novel which, as the novelist Howard Jacobson has pithily observed, erupts with “unexpected savagery from time to time”.

One such instance is where the schoolteacher and anti-Semite Mr Deasy explains; “Ireland, they say, has the honour of being the only country which never persecuted the Jews ... and do you know why? She never let them in. That’s why.”

The implications of Joyce’s words are obvious. It wasn’t the absence of motivation that made Ireland a non-persecutor of the Jews, it was the absence of opportunity.

In a similar manner, the existence of fewer than 2,000 Jews in Ireland today hasn’t deterred the anti-Semitic paint-daubers of “bandit country”.